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# The perceived similarity of other individuals: The contaminating effects of familiarity and neuroticism

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## Abstract

Individuals are more inclined to trust a person they perceive as similar to themselves. Nevertheless, the perceived similarity of another person can be distorted by many personality and contextual factors. This study assessed whether neuroticism is related to perceived similarity and whether the familiarity of a context influences this association. Specifically, 87 participants received a hypothetical resume that described an applicant. Participants rated this job applicant along a series of trait adjectives. Furthermore, they completed the NEO FFI to characterize their own personality. While evaluating the job applicant, background music was presented, and this music was familiar to only a portion of participants. Participants with elevated levels of neuroticism were more likely to perceive the applicant as dissimilar to themselves on openness and extraversion. This perceived dissimilarity in extraversion was especially pronounced when the music was rated as familiar. These findings were ascribed to the sensitivity towards threat that underpins neuroticism, which provokes an inflated recognition of differences in familiar contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies have attempted to delineate the factors that promote altruism, empathy, cooperation, and compliance (e.g., Kruger, 2001; Rushton, 1989). A sizeable portion of this literature has demonstrated that individuals are more inclined to like, understand, trust, assist, and heed a person they perceive as similar to themselves. In other words, individuals who share the same occupation, interests, values, personality, ethnicity, religion, and so forth are more likely to appreciate and support one another (e.g. AhYun, 2002; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

Even trivial, superficial similarities promote favorable attitudes towards strangers. Studies reveal that individuals are more inclined to like a person with whom they believe they share the same birth date (e.g., Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998) or similar surnames, even when ethnicity is controlled (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004), with effect sizes that vary from small to medium (cf., Cohen, 1969). These associations might have evolved because individuals perceive themselves favorably and thus implicitly assume that anyone with similarities must also demonstrate desirable qualities (e.g., Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005).

Conversely, individuals often perceive anyone whose traits differ from their own characteristics as threatening rather than trustworthy. From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), for instance, individuals are less inclined to identify with anyone who demonstrates personality traits that differ from their own characteristics (see Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). As a consequence, they tend to feel mistrust and suspicion towards individuals with whom they do not share the same traits (e.g., Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Dissimilar individuals, therefore, are often regarded as a potential source of threat. Consistent with this premise, research reveals that individuals are less inclined to like someone with whom they do not share a similar personality (e.g., Suman & Sethi, 1985).

### 1.1. Perceived similarity in personality

Notwithstanding these findings, the determinants – in contrast to the consequences – of perceived similarity have not been established definitively. The extent to which individuals feel similar to one another does not solely reflect objective characteristics. For example, Funder (1995) characterized some of the factors that determine the extent to which individuals can accurately evaluate the personality of peers. Properties of the judges, targets, and the traits they are evaluating all affect accuracy. For example, defensive judges tend not to appraise the personality of other individuals accurately. In addition, active targets can be judged more accurately than can passive targets. Finally, visible or desirable traits can be appraised more accurately than covert or undesirable traits.

Need for closure, which reflects the tendency to reach firm decisions rapidly (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), might also affect the accuracy of these evaluations. Individuals who shun ambiguity tend to use schemas or stereotypes to evaluate colleagues and strangers (e.g., Kruglanski & Freund, 1983). These schemas can amplify the discrepancy between perceived and actual similarity.

According to the concept of *egocentric anchoring and adjustment*, as propounded by Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, and Gilovich (2004), individuals engage in two distinct phases when they attempt to characterize another person. First, they assume this person demonstrates their own characteristics and adopts their own attitudes, values, beliefs, and perspectives, called anchoring.

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